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ABSTRACT

Men and women were randomly chosen from courthouse divorce files. After initial contact by mail and by phone, those who agreed were mailed questionnaires developed to assess adjustment to divorce and to obtain information about the nature of divorce. Of those sent questionnaires, 44% completed and returned the assessment; the total sample consisted of 133 subjects. A sex difference in decision to separate was found, with both men and women reporting that the decision had been the woman's. Women showed better adjustment than men on a divorce adjustment scale. In addition, women reported significantly fewer suicidal feelings than males. However, males had significantly lower factor scores on the Profile of Mood States for tension and on the Semantic Differential for stability. Other Profile of Mood States and Semantic Differential measures did not reveal significant sex differences. (Author)

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Sex Differences in Initiation of and Adjustment to Divorce

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Running head: Divorce: Sex Differences

Sex Differences in Initiation of and Adjustment to Divorce

Prior research has suggested that marriage is more psychologically advantageous to men than to women and that men are more distressed by divorce than women are (Gove, 1972a, 1972b). Women are more likely to initiate breakups prior to marriage than men are and are more likely than men to perceive problems in premarital relationships (Hill, Rubin, & Peplan, 1976). Goode (1956) found that more women reported that they had initiated separation and divorce than had their ex-spouses (Goode did not interview men who had been divorced). Even though women reported they were the initiators, Goode believed that their ex-husbands had purposely driven them to divorce, rather than initiate it themselves. Goode seemed to base this belief on the cultural stereotype that men are more roving, whereas women are more concerned with marital stability.

There are some data which have been interpreted by sociologists as indicants of the relative advantages of being married, as opposed to divorced. These data focus on the relative morbidity, suicide, and mental illness rates as they are associated with marital status and with sex. Glick and Carter (1970) have argued that:

> The advantages of life as a married person appear to be much more abundant for men than for women, insofar as such a life minimizes the death rate. In numerical terms, unmarried men had death rates which (on an un-

weighted basis) averaged 135% higher than those for married men, whereas unmarried women had death rates which averaged 67% higher than those for married women. According to this measure, therefore, being married was twice as advantageous to men as to women (Glick and Carter, 1970, pp. 341-342).

The causes of death for which the divorced rates are higher consist largely of violent deaths and debilitating diseases associated with behavioral excess and/or poor health care (e.g., cirrhosis, pensumonia). The reasons for the differential rates for the divorced and the married are not known. Similarly, the reasons for the relatively greater disadvantage for divorced men, as compared to divorced women, are not known. Glick and Carter (1970) hypothesize that women are more likely to take care of themselves, whereas men need to be taken care of -- hence, the relatively greater disadvantage of divorced men. However, they have no data independent of the death rates themselves to validate their hypothesis.

Gove (1972a, 1972b) examined the rates of suicide and mental illness for married and divorced men and women. He argued strongly that marriage is relatively more advantageous to men than to women, and that being not married is more disadvantageous to men than to women.

In his first study (Gove, 1972a), the percentage rate of suicide for the never married, the divorced, and the widowed were each divided by the percentage rate of suicide for the

married, giving three indices indicating the relative suicidal distress of non-married groups as compared to a married group. In all samples, the relative distress of the nonmarried group was much greater for men than for women. This difference was especially striking for the divorced, suggesting "that the shift from being married to being divorced.....has a more negative impact on men than on women" (Gove, 1972a, p. 208). The ratios for females in almost all cases were greater than 1.0, indicating that being not married was more suicidally distressing than being married, although not to as great a degree as for men. These data suggest that divorce affects men especially strongly, but that for both men and women married status is more advantageous than divorced status.

Further data to support the relatively greater advantage of marriage as opposed to divorce, especially for men, were reviewed by Gove (1972b) in a second article, which focused on the relationship between sex, marital status, and mental illness. The data presented in this article came from other published studies, not from original research. Gove examined the data in seventeen studies published since World War II which have examined the relationships between sex, marriage, and mental health. All but one of these studies sampled people living outside institutions; various criteria for the global label "mental illness" were used in the studies. Gove did not combine data across studies, but instead looked for consistent patterns of results. The conclusions which are relevant to divorce are as follows:

1. All of the studies found that married women have higher rates of mental disorder than married men.
2. For divorced persons, eight of the studies showed that males have higher rates of mental disorder than women, compared to three studies which show that females have higher rates than men. In two studies which combined data for the widowed and the divorced, males had higher rates of mental disorder.
3. Durkheim's coefficient of preservation was used to compare the mental illness rates of the divorced and the married (coefficient = rate of mental illness of divorced divided by rate of mental illness of married). In all of the eleven studies which had this information, the ratio was over 1.0 for both males and females, indicating greater mental illness for the divorced as compared to the married. The average ratio for males was 5.09; for females it was half that (2.80).

The purposes of this research project were a) to compare the reports of men and women regarding their desire for separation leading to divorce and b) to compare the relative adjustment of men and women to their single status following separation leading to divorce. It was hypothesized on the basis of prior research that both men and women would report that women were more likely

to initiate separation leading to divorce and that women would show better adjustment than men following such separation.

METHOD

Subjects:

Adults who filed for divorce at the Lane County Courthouse in Eugene, Oregon, and who were still living in Lane County, were selected for the research sample. Every two months over an eight-month period beginning in January, 1974, subjects were selected for the study. At each of the four testing times, male and female subjects were chosen in each of six groups on the basis of time since filing.

At each two-month testing period, the names of 18 males and 18 females were selected in each of the time-since-filing groups.[1] At the time each name was chosen, all demographic data available in the courthouse file was recorded. At the time that names were selected at the courthouse, subjects were excluded for the following reasons: (1) they had been selected in a previous testing period or their ex-spouse had been previously selected; (2) they currently lived outside Lane County; (3) they had sought divorce counseling at the University of Oregon Psychology Clinic; or (4) their ex-spouse had sought such divorce counseling.

Subjects were contacted by letter and informed of the project and how their names were selected. Phone contact followed to give further details of the program, to get further information, and to receive the subject's decision regarding participation in the study. At this stage, subjects were excluded for the

following reasons: (1) the subject had reconciled with his/her spouse or (2) he/she had moved outside Lane County. Attempts were made to contact all subjects selected. All subjects were recorded who refused, could not be located, were known to have died, or were excluded, along with the reason for refusal or exclusion and all available data. For subjects contacted by phone, courthouse file data, testing period, remarriage status, time of separation prior to filing, and who decided on the divorce were obtained in most cases; for subjects who could not be located only the first three categories of information were available.

Testing procedure:

All eligible subjects who agreed to participate in the research sample were sent a set of assessment data which took about 2 hours to complete. This included the Divorce Survey (Johnson, 1975), Sources of Marital Dissatisfaction (Johnson, 1975), Profile of Mood States (McNair, Lorr, and Droppleman, 1971), Semantic Differential (Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum, 1957), and instructions for completing the questionnaires. Subjects were paid $2.00 for participation. Forms were completed and returned by 133 subjects, which represented 16.8% of the names originally chosen and 43.8% of those contacted by phone who were eligible to participate.

Measures:

The Profile of Mood States, or POMS, was designed to measure "fluctuating affective states" (McNair, Lorr, and Droppleman, 1971, p. 5). The six mood states measured by this instru-

ment, Tension, Depression, Anger, Activity, Fatigue, and Confusion, were used as indices of emotional distress.

The Semantic Differential technique has been examined in detail in the book by Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957). In the current divorce assessment project, respondents rated bipolar adjectives in relation to themselves, as they currently felt. Fifty-five bipolar adjectives were included; these items provided scale scores on six factors which have been shown to have high factorial stability. These six factors are Evaluation, Potency, Activity, Stability, Receptivity, and Aggressiveness. Two of these (Evaluation and Stability) were used as indices of emotional distress.

The Adjustment Scale on the Divorce Survey (Johnson, 1975) was used to assess emotional and behavioral distress resulting from divorce. In addition, responses to a set of items on the Adjustment Scale which assessed suicidal feelings were evaluated separately.

Locus of the decision to separate was assessed on the Divorce Survey and during the initial phone contact with each subject. Another way of looking at the issue of who most wanted the divorce would be to examine attachment to the ex-spouse. Attachment was measured in three ways. The first measure, "Contact with the ex-spouse," was a summary score of eight items which dealt with contact with the ex-spouse; these included things like the frequency of contacts, the desire for more or less contact, arguments during contact, etc. The items were

scored so that a high score on this measure indicated infrequent contact and little interest in contact with the ex-spouse. The second attachment measure, "Feelings about the ex-spouse," was a summary score which contained 10 items (three of which were also on the "Contact with ex-spouse" scale) of items which dealt with emotions and thoughts about the ex-spouse. These included things like desire for reconciliation, willingness to do favors for the ex-spouse, feeling guilty or angry toward the ex-spouse, etc. These items were scored so that a high score on the measure indicated negative feelings towards the ex-spouse and no desire for reconciliation. The third attachment measure, "Future Expectations," was a summary score of five items which dealt with attitude towards life without the ex-partner; these included things like eagerness for independence, feelings of being liberated or freed, etc. Items in the scale were scored so that a high score indicated positive expectations for an independent future.

Finally, both gross income and net income were also reported on the Divorce Survey.

RESULTS

Sex differences in decision to separate and attachment to the ex-spouse

Results clearly confirmed the hypothesis that both men and women would report that women more frequently were the initiators of separation leading to divorce. A majority of women (62%) reported that the decision to separate was their own, rather than their ex-husband's (18%) or a mutual decision (20%). For men,

39% reported that the decision to separate was their own, whereas 45% reported it was made by the ex-wife and 16% reported it was a mutual decision. A chi square to test the sex difference in the first two categories (subject's decision vs. ex-spouse's decision)

Insert Table 1 about here

was significant (Table 1, $x^2 = 11.48$, $p<.001$). Thus, both men and women reported that it was the women who were more likely to initiate the separations in this sample.

Scores on each of the three measures of attachment to the ex-spouse were divided into two groups: "disengaged" and "attached". For each measure, "disengaged" were those whose score was greater than zero, indicating lack of interest in contact with the ex-spouse, neutral or negative feelings about the ex-spouse, and a positive attitude towards the future (for each of the three measures respectively). The "attached" were those whose score was less than or equal to zero on each measure.

Women were more likely than men to report disengagement from the ex-spouse on the measure of contact with ex-spouse (Table 2). A chi square on this difference was significant $x^2 = 6.15$, $p < .02$). The mean scores on this measure (Table 2) were in the predicted direction (females scored higher than males), but a t test revealed no significant difference.

Insert Table 2 about here

On the measure of feelings about the ex-spouse, differences

were in the same direction (Table 2), but the chi square did not attain a standard level of statistical significance ($x^2 = 3.31$, $p < .08$). The t test analysis was significant ($t(130) = 2.14$, $p < .05$), indicating that males reported stronger positive feelings about their ex-spouse than did females, on the average.

For the measure of future expectations, there was no sex difference in the number who expected a positive future ($x^2 = 1.75$, ns). The mean difference between men and women was not significant for this measure (Table 2).

Sex differences in adjustment following separation

Ten indices of adjustment were used, as described above (Divorce Survey Adjustment scale and Suicidal Feelings scale; POMS factor scores for Tension, Depression, Anger, Activity, Fatigue, and Confusion; Semantic Differential scores for Evaluation and Stability). Since all these various indices were used to measure a general construct, "adjustment," the intercorrelations among them were assessed; these are shown in Table 3. High scores on

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Insert Table 3 about here

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measures could indicate either better or worse adjustment, depending on the measure; for example, a high score on the POMS Tension factor indicated poor adjustment. Therefore, different measures might be either correlated positively or negatively, depending on whether both are scored in the same direction or in opposite directions.

The pattern of correlations was examined to assess whether

correlations were both significant and significant in the predicted direction. Table 4 shows the relationship between the predicted direction of correlation and the actual significance

Insert Table 4 about here

of correlations for the total sample. A chi square test of this table was significant ($\underline{x}^2 = 40.11$, $\underline{p} < .001$), indicating that these measures were correlated significantly in the predicted direction. This finding is consistent with the interpretation that they are measures of a general construct, which is here labeled "adjustment". When the same correlations were examined separately for male subjects and for female subjects, almost identical results were obtained. The least consistently correlated measures were the POMS Fatigue measure and the Semantic Differential Stability measure. The Divorce Survey Adjustment Scale, which is probably the most comprehensive measure, was significantly correlated with all measures except the Semantic Differential Stability in the total sample.

Means for both sexes on each of the ten measures are shown in Table 5. Females showed significantly superior adjustment on

Insert Table 5 about here

the Divorce Survey Adjustment scale, which was the most comprehensive adjustment measure. In addition, they reported significantly fewer suicidal feelings than males. However, males had a significantly lower factor score on the POMS for Tension and on

the Semantic Differential for Stability. Other measures did not reveal significant sex differences.

Sex differences in income

There was a striking sex difference in gross income and in net income (Table 5). On both measures, men were significantly higher than women. It should be noted that net income was figured after subtracting for alimony or child support payments, if they were coming out of the salary, or with the addition of any such supplementary income from the ex-spouse where applicable.

Discussion

Earlier studies have amassed considerable evidence that men are more debilitated than women, as a result of divorce, on such criteria as suicide (Gove, 1972a), commitment to mental hospitals (Gove, 1972b), and death due to debilitating diseases or violence (Glick & Carter, 1970). In this study, in which all subjects were living and not hospitalized, sex differences were examined on self-report measures of adjustment, on measures of attachment to the ex-spouse, and on the origin of the initial decision to separate. While some sex differences were found, they were not all in the direction of relative superiority for women. In addition, most of the findings are probably best construed in terms of relative improvement in adjustment since separation, rather than relatively greater distress or trauma since separation. That is, on most measures of adjustment, these subjects on the whole reported feeling better they did before separation (on Divorce Survey items), or they reported moods and self-evaluations

within a normal score range (on the POMs and Semantic Differential). This is congruent with Renne's (1971) finding that maximum distress is experienced within an unhappy marriage. Those who are divorced are midway between the unhappily married and the happily married, and the divorced should be thought of as having taken a positive step toward long-term adjustment, according to Renne (1971). Thus, the divorced may be thought of as relatively distressed or relatively adjusted, depending on the group to which they are compared. In addition, they are probably moving in the direction of greater adjustment, and the sex differences will be discussed with that conceptualization in mind.

Some findings regarding sex differences are congruent with earlier results. First, on the Divorce Survey adjustment scale, men reported an overall adjustment level lower than that of women. Second, men reported less improvement in their suicidal feelings and ideation than did women. Both sexes were less bothered by thoughts of suicide than previously (on the average), but women were significantly better off than men. Women also seemed to be happier than men to be out of their former marriages; women were much more likely than men to initiate the separations, and women had more negative feelings towards their ex-husbands than men had towards their ex-wives. Overall, then, men in this study seemed to have more difficulty moving away from the past marriage and they experienced less improvement in their general adjustment than did women.

However, women also had some problems. Most clearly, women

earned less money than men did; net income, after adding alimony and child support, was also less for women than for men. In addition, women reported more tension (on the POMS) and less stability (on the Semantic Differential) than men did; no other mood measures differentiated between the sexes. Thus, the problems for women seemed to be centered around tension associated with the loss of a stable life situation and the problems of living on a small income (often while raising children).

It should, of course, be kept in mind that all the results have been correlational in nature and that causal relationships can only be hypothesized. It should also be remembered that almost all of the information was obtained via questionnaires which subjects filled out anonymously (a few variables came from data available at the courthouse, e.g., date of filing for divorce, and a few came from the phone contact, e.g., locus of decision to separate). Thus, although several measures were used, only one method was extensively employed for data collection.

Another limitation is the restricted sample of subjects available for study. All these subjects were residents of Lane County, Oregon; they come from a larger sample of randomly selected names and represent those in the sample whose addresses were most stable, who could be contacted by phone (in most cases), and who were agreeable to participating in the study. It is probable that such a subsample does differ in many ways from the total sample of those who file for divorce, but it is unclear just how much they differ and what dimensions are most

likely to differ.

Given the above restrictions, the current study is probably best viewed as presenting information about the covariation of self-reported variables in the divorce adjustment of those who are most geographically stable and most willing to disclose information about themselves. The results may well turn out to be generalizable to other samples and other modes of data collection, but their generalizability will need to be established in further research.

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FOOTNOTES

[1]In the first two testing periods (January/February, 1974 and March/April, 1974) fewer names were selected. However, it became clear that more names would be needed, because of a high proportion of selected individuals who could not be contacted by phone or letter. As a result, from 12 to 18 names were selected in various groups in those two testing periods. Thereafter it was decided to raise the initial number of names selected to 18 in each group.

Table 1. Number of males and females reporting locus of decision to separate as own

	Subject's own decision	Ex-spouse's decision
Female	45	13
Male	23	27

Table 2. Attachment to the ex-spouse versus disengagement from the ex-spouse

	Contact with ex-spouse		Feelings about ex-spouse		Future expectations	
	F	M	F	M	F	M
> 0 "Disengaged"	66	42	67	47	66	48
≤ 0 "Attached"	8	16	6	11	8	11
Mean Scores	6.59	5.36	9.42	6.85	5.21	4.41

Table 3. Intercorrelations of Adjustment measures for the total sample

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Divorce Survey Adjustment Scale Total	.62***	-.30**	-.39**	-.28**	.33**	-.18*	-.32**	.43***	.04
2. Suicidal feelings Total	---	-.25**	-.25**	-.30**	.21*	-.11	-.20*	.22*	.15
3. Profile of Mood States Tension/Anxiety Total		---	.75***	.55***	-.34**	.60***	.76***	-.52***	-.24
4. POMS Depression Total			---	.63***	-.41***	.56***	.79***	-.52***	-.14
5. POMS Anger Total				---	-.27**	.42***	.53***	-.40***	-.19
6. POMS Vigor Total					---	-.39**	-.39**	.59***	.12
7. POMS Fatigue Total						---	.55***	-.48***	-.20
8. POMS Confusion Total							---	-.59***	-.30
9. Semantic Differential Total								---	.43**
10. SD Stability Scale									---

* = p < .05
** = p < .01
*** = p < .001

Table 4. Significance of correlations among adjustment measures for the total sample.

Actual correlation:	Predicted correlation	
	Positive	Negative
Significantly positive	17	0
Not significant	3	2
Significantly negative	0	23

Table 5. Mean adjustment scores for each sex (on each of ten indices of adjustment) and mean income for each sex

	Males	Females	t	p
Divorce Survey Adjustment scale	16.64	24.75*	2.43	.02
Suicidal feelings	1.98	2.63*	2.23	.05
POMS Tension	8.86*	11.13	1.98	.05
Depression	7.66*	10.12	1.37	n.s.
Anger	8.54	8.38*	< 1	n.s.
Activity	18.95*	17.86	1.01	n.s.
Fatigue	6.59*	8.46	1.93	.06
Confusion	6.16*	7.19	1.30	n.s.
Semantic Differential				
Evaluation	33.41	35.80*	< 1	n.s.
Stability	6.84*	5.01	2.20	.05
Income: gross	$936	$591	3.93	.001
net	$695	$443	3.17	.01

*Indicates the sex showing greater adjustment